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Estate Landscapes in northern Europe:

a new agenda

By Jonathan Finch

This volume has, for the first time, explored regional and national manifestations of the estate landscape across northern Europe in order to internationalize what have traditionally been isolated and internal narratives, and it has also brought together several disciplinary approaches to the topic. In doing so it has demonstrated that the landed estate was one of the most significant structuring elements within the European landscape over the last five centuries, and that it had a critical role in the creation of the modern landscape. Its features distinguished it from the wider working landscape in terms of scale, landscape character, and the social relationships that developed within estate communities. The aim of the volume was not, however, to produce chapters from a template, but to explore different styles and research interests, thus adding historiographical interest. As a significant mediator of change within the modern European landscape, the range of estate landscapes across the region reflects diverse historical trajectories, diverse topographies, and diverse socio-economic contexts. The estate flourished as an element of privileged or elite culture within a wide range of environments, its scale and role adapted to local circumstances, in such a way that it created a rich and diverse mosaic of landscape types across the wider region.

Established historical approaches have tended to focus on individual estates or families, emphasizing continuities that reinforce a narrative of naturalized privilege, benevolent guardianship and paternalistic governance, and thus, importantly but often implicitly, reinforce a narrative of social continuity in ownership.¹ The wider transnational scope of this volume has acknowledged a range of similarities, not least in the cultural

Forge or Smithy building and garden wall, Løvenholm, Auning, Denmark The building marks the terminus of one of the axial walks in the gardens around the sixteenth and seventeenth century moated manor house, with the forge doors opening onto the public road. Beyond, earthworks are preserved in the fields and in the distance the forest, for which Løvenholm is still renowned. (Photo: Jonathan Finch)

vocabulary shared between the social elite across northern Europe. This shared culture extended from performative manners around the dining table, to the collecting impulse realized in cabinets of curiosities, ordered within a succession of rooms, out into the garden and grounds, and so into the wider landscape of farms, cottages and forest.² However, the volume's wider purview has also drawn out the differences between the houses and their associated landholdings across the region, highlighting phases and moments of discontinuity, and it is here, in the interstices, that research is needed to examine the contingencies and trajectories that created the distinct variations which prompted change and development.

Nowhere are the subtle but important differences more apparent than in the semantics of the structure at the centre of the landscapes: the manor or country house. The lord's farm – the *herregård* or Gut of the Scandinavian and north German landscapes – was conceived as a large (relative to the local area) agricultural unit distinguished by its rights and privileges across the land and workforce, drawing on the legacy of medieval feudal tenures. However, the English country house represented an accumulation of wealth vested in the land, which brought with it social and political roles of both the rural and the urban worlds across which the elite operated and governed, but which relied on a combination of in-hand and leased farms. Even within each of these models there was room for variation, as exemplified by Knapp's *Gutsherrschaft* and *Grundherrschaft* and the relative emphasis placed on farming the demesne with unpaid labour or on rental income.³ Both types of landscape communicated the prestige and privilege of the owners through their control over the land, despite differences in how that control was exercised and manifested. Though the paths of social and economic development differed between Britain, the Netherlands, northern and southern Germany and Scandinavia, the core of estates was recognizable and comparable across northern Europe.⁴ This testifies to the fact that landscape features and character can be superficially similar, yet derive from divergent paths of development, something which is important to bear in mind when considering other apparently long-term continuities within the landscape.

The survival or persistence of the manor over much of continental northern Europe and its erosion and apparent disappearance in parts of the Netherlands and Britain is important to understand in terms of the contrasting trajectories of landscape development. The decline of the manor within British historiography is invariably discussed as the end of the me-

dieval era, and its legacy is rarely considered into the modern period, but even in the eighteenth century manors were often the units of land that were bought and sold, indicating that they had some continuing, yet ossified, significance within the landscape linked to ownership.⁵ The continental experience suggests that tax exemption and other privileges that came with manorial ownership were sufficient incentive to preserve a manorial presence and nomenclature within the community and landscape.⁶ The identification of these differences and their geographical dimension makes it important to explore the development of the estate landscape through the lens of manorialism in the early-modern period and, in particular, to explore how the location of administrative and legal responsibilities over the land and community was related to the seat of power.

The other key dynamic in the preservation, or erosion, of the manor as an important seat of authority within the landscape, capable of shaping landscape character, was the relationship between the nobility and the crown. Relationships within the ruling class had an impact on how directly the landscape was managed, and this could be influenced by the relationships between the crown, the nobility and the freeholders, as well as colonial and imperial relationships between regions. The relationship between the crown and the nobility is therefore another critical power relationship which varied between localities as well as nations, and impacted the role and development of the estate, but which is poorly understood in comparative terms beyond national boundaries.⁷

The manner in which land was transferred between generations had a significant effect on the accumulation of land and the way in which it was viewed and managed. In Britain, laws were strengthened at the end of the seventeenth century to protect the interests of landowners, including the greater use of strict settlement to preserve estates through generational change.⁸ At the same time, the last manifestations of feudal relationships were abolished, completing the shift from an emphasis on income from the tenant entering or taking the property, to one from annual rent, which was more closely linked to the market price for the agricultural product. This situation was not unique or distinct from continental practices, but the closest similarities really only extended to the Netherlands and to northern parts of Germany. Where inheritance practices affected the fragmentation of estates, marriage would offer the chief opportunity to extend ownership between generations. The overall pressure was towards smaller units of landholding and the dilution of a sense of nobility amongst an

ever broader base of heirs. Yet even here, within this complex of family-based systems, an external force could also affect the overall social context. The crown could intervene to increase or restrict the absolute size and constitution of the nobility. Both inheritance systems and the social relationships between the nobility and the crown, whilst obviously fluctuating over time and space, had an impact on the survival and development of manorial relationships across the local landscape. The impact that these factors had on the estate landscape and how they were manifested needs to be systematically examined; such an examination would shed light on the extent to which the size and composition of estates was dependent upon them, as well as the character of the buildings and fieldscape, and the social structure of the dependent communities.

One of the key characteristics of the estate landscape, one which is often assumed and rarely critiqued, is its rurality. As mentioned above, the dichotomy between rural and urban is significant in the British nomenclature, suggesting an early and important relationship between the two spheres in the lives of the ruling elite. As Kuiper has shown, the relationship between the rural and urban spheres varied in the Netherlands depending on the source of a family's wealth and the the location of power in the political sense. However, less work has been done on that relationship – on the comparative lifestyles of the elite within the urban and rural worlds, for example. Within these two spheres, it is also interesting to draw out the roles which the family adopted, subtly changing their identities and their presentation of social roles in each sphere, with particular reference to how gendered roles were performed. The increasing yet belated recognition that women played a crucial role in maintaining elite family identities and wealth opens up new avenues to explore more rounded definitions of gender and how they were contested in different spheres, such as the urban and rural, and at different phases in the lifecycle, such as marriage and widowhood. Of particular interest would be the construction of the 'rural' in elite identities through their engagement with the agrarian, and through self-representation in art, such as conversation pieces that showed the owner-family within a rural estate landscape.⁹ The concept of rurality is made more complex in regions where industrialisation was a key component of the landscape. The processing of iron and copper and the development of forestry might not impact the character of the landscape, but the exploitation of resources in the form of ironworks, saw mills and paper mills certainly did. Industrial production attracted urban entre-

preneurs into the estate landscape as investors and owners, latterly often replaced by joint stock companies as the capitalization of the industries developed. On the one hand, it is possible to explore the development of rural industry on estates in Sweden and Norway, where land was plentiful and populations relatively low, in contrast to the British context, which was both industrialised and urbanised very early, and yet where the characteristic ideology of the landed estate was avowedly rural.¹⁰ The landscape in the Netherlands offers a further example of a heavily urbanised society in which rural retreats were assets used by the urban elite to define their status, and yet whose productive agricultural landscape was only embraced to a limited extent.¹¹ The next phase of research should therefore explore the relationships between rural and urban landscapes and the roles they played in both the wealth and the identities of the owners. An integral part of this new dialogue, however, must relate to how landowners forged social ties and relationships with the wider rural society. The contribution of microhistories, for example, has demonstrated the fine-grained detail within the rural working classes in the nineteenth century, and the complexity of rural society. Yet few of the social studies of rural life acknowledge the importance of landownership as a context which can impact on those relationships. It is important therefore to consider how the estate defined social relationships and what impact landownership had on the way rural life adapted to the dramatic changes seen in the post-medieval period.

It is of course inevitable that even in widening the boundaries of research on a subject such as the estate landscape, there is clear evidence that they could be widened further. The European landscape draws on a shared culture of the estate, even though this culture has been shown to have different histories and different manifestations. The nations involved also shared wider, global ambitions, and engaged in colonization over the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The global footprint of the estate is therefore an important aspect to recognise. The Dutch and British engagement with Atlantic trade is well documented, as increasingly is that of Denmark. These entanglements have been examined from an historical and economic perspective with a strong emphasis on the exploitation of enslaved Africans.¹²

It is important to recognise that the environmental and landscape impact of this exploitation, as well as the necessary industrial innovation, drew heavily on domestic or metropolitan experiences – and that within those models for exploitation, the estate was important. Therefore as we

develop a new research agenda for the estate landscape on a European scale, we must also acknowledge, recognise, and explore the global impact of those landscapes. The modern landscape was defined to a large extent by the estate, by the power of the wealthy and privileged owners. The owners, like the landscapes they shaped, had diverse histories. As we research the lives that were lived within these landscapes by individuals and families of every social station, it is important to place them within a global context because the modern era is defined by its globalism.

Just as the reach of the estate and its impact on landscapes across the world wherever northern Europeans settled must be recognized, so the reception of the estate and the manor house becomes a central issue to European identity. The role that historical communities played within estate landscapes – their role in agricultural, industrial and arboreal development – is not only understated in the literature, but in the presentation of the manor house as a heritage resource. The British undoubtedly lead the way in the popular presentation of the country house as a national heritage asset, but the narratives presented and the audiences visiting country houses and their gardens have been the subject of much scholarly critique.¹³ It is important to understand how the different historical trajectories explored in this volume have been manifested in the national presentation of these houses and their landscapes as heritage, or how they have been repurposed within a variety of modern democratic states.¹⁴ The wider political histories of northern Europe in the twentieth century and beyond have a profound effect on public engagement with these landscapes as much as they do with discontinuities of ownership and access. This, too, is a key area for future research.

The potential of future research on the European estate landscape is impressive. It combines the histories of communities across the region and brings out shared identities and experiences amongst those living in the landscape. It also looks into how they continue to play a role in the presentation of the past to contemporary audiences and therefore addresses how we wish to use the past to structure the future. It recognises that northern Europe has strong cultural ties which were forged and reinforced through social and economic contacts which created dialogues between many social groups. The history of the estate shows common European identities expressed in landscape types that were shared between countries, and which estate owners as well as reformers and scientists travelled

to experience, record and share. By reconnecting those networks, we can further our understanding of the European experience and extend our understanding, through reflection and comparison, of our own landscapes. It is a European conversation that has a global reach.

Notes

- 1 Classic studies from the UK remain, Beastall, T. W. 1975 *A North Country Estate: The Lumleys and Saundersons as Landowners, 1600–1900* London; Richards, E. 1973 *The Leviathan of Wealth: the Sutherland Fortune in the Industrial Revolution* London; Wade Martins, S. 1980 *A Great Estate at Work: the Holkham Estate and its Inhabitants in the Nineteenth Century* Cambridge; Wordie, J.R. 1982 *Estate Management in Eighteenth Century England: the Building of the Leveson-Gower Fortune* London.
- 2 See for example Symonds, J. (ed.) 2010 *Table Settings: the material culture and social context of Dining, AD 1700–1900* Oxford; Macgregor, A. 2007 *Curiosity and Enlightenment: collectors and collections from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century* New Haven; Dixon Hunt, J. 2004 *The Picturesque Garden in Europe* London; Finch, J. & Giles, K. (eds) 2008 *Estate Landscapes: design, improvement and power in the post-medieval landscape* Woodbridge.
- 3 Rasmussen, C.P. 2004 *Ostelbische Gutsherrschaft und nordwestdeutsche Freiheit in einem Land – die Güter des Herzogtums Schleswig 1524–1770* *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 52/2 pp. 25–40.
- 4 Bavel, B. v. & Hoyle, R. (eds) 2010 *Social Relations: property and power* Turnhout.
- 5 Bailey, M. 2013 *The English Manor c.1200–c.1500* Manchester.
- 6 E.g. Myrdal, J. 1999 *Jordbruket under feodalismen. Det svenska jordbrukets historia II*.
- 7 For early overviews see Goodwin, A. (ed.) 1967 *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* London; Kirby, D. 1970 *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period* London; Lieven, D. 1992 *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* New York.
- 8 Habakkuk 1994 *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership, 1650–1950* Oxford.
- 9 McDonagh, B. 2017 *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830* London; Lyons, H. et al (eds) *Placing Faces: the portrait and the English country house in the long eighteenth century* Manchester.
- 10 Pocock, J. G. A. 1985, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge; Alestalo, M. and Kuhnle, S. 1986 ‘The Scandinavian Route: economic, social and political developments in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden’ *International Journal of Sociology* 16/3–4, pp.3–38.
- 11 Mijnhardt, W.W. 1998 ‘The Dutch Republic as a town’ *Eighteenth Century Studies* 31/3, pp.345–48.
- 12 Armstrong, D.V. 2003 *Creole Transformation from slavery to Freedom: historical archaeology of the East End Community, St John, Virgin Islands* Gainesville.

- 13 See for example Mandler, P. 1997 *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, New Haven; Smith, L. 2006 *Uses of Heritage* Abingdon; Wright, P. 1985 *On Living in an Old Country*, London.
- 14 Frausing, M. *Oplevelsernes herregård. Kommerciel kulturarv på de danske herregårde*, Aarhus (unpublished PhD thesis) 2012.